



Prevailing Approaches to Youth-Focused Relationship Violence Prevention in the U.S.

Establishing an Evidence Base for Melbourne's Good People Act Now

Executive Summary

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Violence against women (VAW) is worldwide issue, as one in every three women worldwide will experience some form of relationship violence in their lifetime (Butchart & Mikton, 2014). This frequency translates to the Broadmeadows community of Victoria, Australia. In an effort to address the high rate of family and relationship violence in the community, the Banksia Gardens Community Services (BGCS) established the Good People Act Now (GPAN) program. GPAN is made of youth leaders who work to advance community development through education and training about gender equity, healthy relationship practices, and bystander intervention. However, due to the complexities of measuring societal behavior change, it is difficult to assess the efficacy of violence prevention programs. Through in-depth interviews with experts located in the United States, we aim to provide GPAN with a strong evidence base for violence prevention approaches.

We began with determining the core values and goals of GPAN to structure our discussions around. Emily Sporik, the Gender Equity Officer at BGCS, informed us about the program's approaches and needs. GPAN's core programming is focused around

1. Community outreach
2. Professional development opportunities
3. Creating a safe space
4. Using a gender lens

Community outreach is an evident aspect of GPAN's program development. To raise awareness about violence against women, GPAN attends festivals to engage the community and start the conversation about gender equity and violence against women. GPAN provides young people with knowledge and skills on violence prevention, but also **professional development opportunities**. According to Emily Sporik, GPAN aims to show young people that "they can have a career in this space if they want to," and there are a lot of professional opportunities around gender equity and violence against women. Ms. Sporik emphasizes **creating a safe space** because when people feel safe and the facilitators are sharing their own experiences, she thinks it "helps facilitate human to human connection." To spread awareness about violence against women, GPAN teaches young people about using a "**gender lens**" to recognize gender bias and stereotypes in everyday life, and initiate conversations about the issue in their social lives.

After an in depth analysis of GPAN, we determined the main areas of interest to be further researched in our examination of the programs in the United States. Our interviews with VAW prevention organizations were framed around the following questions:

1. How do they approach teaching about gender equity?
2. How do they define success in their prevention programs? How do they measure it?
3. What do they see as the most effective strategies?
4. What theoretical frameworks or research-based studies inform their approaches?
5. How do they conduct outreach to reach more diverse participants?

Through in-depth interviews and extensive research we identified 32 relevant programs located in the United States that have similar violence prevention goals and values, 7 of these programs were interviewed for further investigation.

The **Boston Area Rape Crisis Center (BARCC)**, aims to end sexual violence through healing and social change by conducting training in schools, organizations, and institutions, providing material for educators, and supporting survivors of abuse. **Casa Myrna** raises awareness of domestic violence and provides shelter and supportive services to survivors. The organization also has a Youth Peer Leader Program, where youth teach others about healthy relationships and domestic violence. The **Jeanne Geiger Crisis Center** offers several programs and services to support survivors of domestic violence and work towards violence prevention including: advocacy and legal support, as well as offering programs such as Girls Inc. **OneLove** aims to educate young people on healthy and unhealthy relationships, empower them to identify abusive behaviors, and demonstrates how to respect their partner and themselves. **Red Wind Consulting Inc.** provides tribal and native specific programs with additional resources to prevent violence against Indigenous women. **Respond Inc.** provides community intervention, and educational programming on teen dating violence for middle and high schools and universities, which includes presentations, classes and workshops, and student training. **Start Strong** educates and engages youth in schools and out of school settings. They educate and encourage teen influencers to actively engage youth in impactful discussions and address microaggressions.

After researching and conducting interviews with relevant VAW prevention organizations, we found certain violence prevention practices that were common across organizations and supported by research and evaluation.

Common effective practices include:

1. Addressing gender equity
2. Youth leadership and peer-to-peer communication
3. Reinforcing material over multiple sessions
4. Scenarios and storytelling
5. Tailoring to the audience
6. Trauma-informed prevention

Gender equity is a multifaceted topic that is addressed at VAW prevention programs in the United States. At many organizations, the topic of gender equity is addressed as part of the discussion on equity, including people of all gender identities and members of the LGBTQ+ community. A common principle in VAW prevention programs is to not limit the discussion with a gender binary scope, and to acknowledge the various identities found in real relationships. VAW prevention programs often address gender bias through discussing examples of survivors and perpetrators with various gender identities, or simply using gender neutral language and observing any displayed assumptions.

Youth leadership and peer-to-peer communication are essential in preventing violence against women. A study concluded that peer educators increase the potential for change, “because they effectively convey information and communicate with their peers in ways that professional staff cannot. They can influence peers' behaviors, be a role model and disseminate information using the language of peers” (Edelstein, Gonyer, 1993, p. 256). According to Eleanor Davis, program specialist at Futures Without Violence, raising up the voices and experiences of young people at youth leadership events empower the youth to have a greater impact on their communities (2019).

Domestic and relationship violence lessons are most effective when **reinforced over multiple sessions**. Finkelhor, Asdigian, and Dziuba-Leatherman identified “repetition of material over more than a single day” (Finkelhor, Asdigian, and Dziuba-Leatherman, 1995) as an element necessary for sexual abuse prevention. Similarly, the Jeanne Geiger Crisis Center believes that reinforcement of material is a necessity in regards to impactful programming. The center conducted a study where they tracked participants programming dosage and evaluated their effects through participant feedback. This study found it takes fifty hours of programming per year for at least four to five years to translate to meaningful change in the participant’s life.

Lessons that implement relevant **scenarios and storytelling** effectively engage the youth and prepare them with the skills to be proactive bystanders. Gretchen D. Werle analyzed using storytelling as a teaching tool with middle school students and concluded that “students respond on an emotional level to both the stories and the storytellers” and “students respond positively to and are engaged by these stories” (Werle, 2004). Red Wind uses a “stopper” exercise to prepare youth participants with the skills on how to respond to a situation where negative connotations are made about Indigenous culture. They brainstorm potential stoppers and how youth can respond to these comments in a non-argumentative way. Participants have reported that by preparing for “stoppers” they encounter in real life, they are able to address microaggressions in a much more effective and informed manner. This empowers the participant to continue to advance change in their community, while also actively spreading awareness to those not yet exposed to the issue.

Youth-based VAW prevention programs identified a need to **tailor to the audience** by integrating the interests of young people. A study found that the inclusion of youth perspectives and interests aids development of a safe and judgment free space for the youth to discuss issues of violence (Reidelberger, Raposo-Hadley, etc, 2021). According to Ms. Davis at Futures Without Violence, because teens consume a lot of content online, That’s Not Cool works to prevent digital dating abuse through the use of online apps. The mobile app, “RespectEffect,” and online game, “CoolNotCool,” help youth identify microaggressions and injustices in media they typically consume (2019). Start Strong’s programs address online media’s promotion of misogynistic behavior, in the form of hip hop music. When they address music in discussions, participants often find themselves thinking, “I never really realized the connotation this lyric had.” By incorporating the discussion around media the youth are already familiar with, they are able to apply the lessons to other types of media, making the lessons seamlessly translate to their real lives.

Trauma-informed prevention is both a unique and effective practice in preventing domestic, family, and intimate partner violence. The Jeanne Geiger Crisis Center found that when somebody is exposed to domestic violence conflicts at a young age and does not receive any intervention, they are ten times more likely to perpetuate that model of violence later in life. Thus the framework for trauma-informed prevention is that by providing intervention following a domestic violence case, the cycle of intergenerational trauma will end at that survivor. The

Jeanne Geiger Crisis Center implements a form of trauma-informed prevention with the concept of Harry Potter therapy. This prevention therapy is used for participants to feel more comfortable reevaluating their own traumatic conflicts through externalizing them in Harry Potter. An instance of this therapy at Jeanne Geiger asked 22 children, who had been exposed to violence, “Is it ever okay to hit when angry?” A shocking full 22 responded with yes, however after the programming the same question was presented and only one participant answered yes.

After an analysis of GPAN’s practices and investigation of the practices effective in the United States, we have developed recommendations for GPAN. We recommend collaboration with BGCS Project REAL to incorporate trauma informed services in their program. GPAN includes crisis resources on their website through a 24-hour hotline; we recommend they include a pop up message on their website, to make the information more readily accessible. It is recommended GPAN also incorporate online resources like RespectEffect into their program, due to the high response rate of incorporating violence prevention training into a form more readily used by teens.

To conclude, this project provided GPAN with a strong evidence base to support their programs and recommendations of what they can do to alter their practices to ensure their efforts successfully benefit the Broadmeadows community. Gender equity is an important aspect for VAW prevention programs to incorporate. This integration should be paired with an emphasis on breaking away from the gender binary and acknowledge the unique identities found in the world. Incorporating youth leadership and peer-to-peer communication is effective for teaching the youth in a manner that heavily resonates with them. Reinforcement of the material covered in programming is essential for the program to translate meaningful impact in the participants life. Providing relevant scenarios and storytelling is beneficial for participants as they develop the skills to appropriately navigate situations they face in real life. Tailoring programs to have more parallels with the interests of the audience establishes a stronger foundation for learning, as the participants are more engaged and likely to retain information. Trauma informed prevention is crucial to violence prevention, as it addresses the cycle of intergenerational violence. We believe that with all these approaches and aspects being integrated into a VAW prevention program, organizations will create a more meaningful and safe impact on their community.